

Revisionism and Reality

By Richard Harwood

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WHEN JOHN KENNEDY died, a maudlin Irishman is alleged to have said, "Ah, they cried the rain down that night."

The columnist, Mary McGrory, told her friend, Daniel P. Moynihan, "We'll never laugh again." To which Moynihan replied, "Heavens, Mary. We'll laugh again. It's just that we'll never be young again."

Those were symptoms of a grief that became one of the great emotional phenomena in all human history. It affected tens of millions of people on every continent. It found expression in poetry and song and prayer and monuments and legends and in memories that today, 10 years after the event, are painful to hold.

"Why," Harold Macmillan would ask, "was this feeling—this sorrow—at once so universal and so individual? Was it not because he seemed, in his own person, to embody all the hopes and aspirations of this new world that is struggling to emerge—to rise, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of the old?"

It would have seemed so then and it would seem so today in those endless clusters of visitors climbing the hill to the grave in Arlington Cemetery, in those numberless shacks and tenements and split-levels where the Kennedy picture hangs on the wall, where the Kennedy mementos are pressed away in albums and cedar chests.

It no longer seems so, however, in the new literature that is arising in the great universities and publishing factories of America. In those quarters, history is being revised, Kennedy legends are being dissected, a harsh new wisdom about the man is struggling to be born.

A Central Theme

THE ESSAYIST Ronald Steel, writing in the New York Review of Books in 1970, struck a central theme for the Kennedy debunkers:

"As the brief reign of John F. Kennedy recedes into the historical past, leaving the Vietnam war as its permanent monument, and as Robert Kennedy's unending succession of agonizing reappraisals now seems little more than a footnote to the tribulations of Lyndon Johnson, it is sometimes hard to remember what the Kennedy legend is all about. . . . It got tarnished some-

where around the Bay of Pigs and never recaptured its former glow. That fiasco was followed by the failure of summit diplomacy at Vienna, the manipulation of public anxiety over Berlin, a dramatic jump in the arms race, the unnecessary trip to the brink during the Cuban missile crisis, timidity on civil rights, legislative stalemate in Congress, and the decision to send the first American troops to Vietnam. Somehow everything went wrong, and increasingly the crusading knight gave way to the conventional politician who had no answers for us. John F. Kennedy's assassination came almost as a reprieve, forever enshrining him in history as the glamorous heroic leader he wanted to be, rather than as the politician buffeted by events he could not control."

Full Flowering

ELABORATIONS on this theme have appeared in uncounted essays and polemical volumes. They are debated and embellished in the higher learning circles and came to full flower this year in Nancy Gager Clinch's book, "The Kennedy Neurosis."

Her personal judgment on Kennedy is unexceptional as an example of New Left revisionism: "I stand with those liberals and liberal-radicals who criticize the Kennedys not for the humanistic promises they so articulately made, but for the preponderant lack of fulfillment of such promises and for the self-centered arrogance that so often underlay the assumption, spoken or not, that only the Kennedys could lead the nation toward the 'American Dream'."

Where she advances the critique is in her use of the psycho-history technique to argue that Kennedy was guilty of policy deficiencies because he was the victim of psychological deficiencies.

Thus: "A major part of my theme is that the Kennedy demand for power grew out of neurotic competition far more than from genuine competence; that an obsessive-compulsive need for power and social recognition basically motivated the Kennedy triumphs; that this need arose from a profound sense of powerlessness and rejection in indi-

vidual Kennedys and in the family as a whole, and that, therefore, the glorious promises, because of their largely neurotic origins, remained largely unfulfilled and unfulfillable."

Specifically, she argues that Kennedy was a man obsessed who took the nation into tragic adventures — the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis, Vietnam — out of a neurotic need to prove his manhood.

Today's "counterculture," as Bruce Mazlish remarks in a foreword to the Clinch book, "is a revulsion against this 'neurosis.' The counterculture seeks to change the values the Kennedys represented. Manliness in an atomic age is seen as a form of madness; and boys wear long hair like girls to symbolize the acceptance of 'womanliness' and its fusion with 'manliness.' Competition gives way to community. Winning the world is seen as losing one's soul. The constant effort to seem 'strong' is perceived as the outer disguise of an inner fear of 'weakness.'"

Two Different Worlds

ON THE FACE of it, it is difficult to reconcile these retrospective judgments of Kennedy with the worldwide sense of loss and love his death occasioned. It is especially difficult today, in a time of approximate detente, in a time when nuclear war seems so unlikely and absurd. Today's children see an American President laughing and drinking with the Chinese. American capitalists spend their weekends playing tennis with Soviet trade ministers. Tourists flock to Moscow and Peking. It is all convivial, relaxed, hopeful. How stupid, how "neurotic" the old ha-

treds and suspicions now seem.

Could it be that the revisionists are right? Could it be that Kennedy deluded and misled us and that all the love and sorrow were won by fraud? It could be. But only if history and Kennedy's existential qualities are erased from the collective memories of mankind.

The world he inherited as he came into the presidency and into our consciousness was a far different world than we live in today. The children of 1960 learned about bomb shelters and practiced air raid drills. There was a sense among men of a terrible peril from nuclear war. In the United States the Gallup polls reflected a popular obsession with survival. Half the people believed there was an imminent danger of a new world war; 80 per cent preferred a nuclear war to life under Communist rule. There were widespread fears that the Russians were winning the missile race, were

winning the world propaganda battle and were hostile and warlike in their attitudes toward the United States. There was popular suspicion of proposals to halt nuclear testing and there was an overwhelming willingness — 71 per cent of the people — to go to war with the Soviet Union rather than permit a blockade in Berlin.

Those were the existential facts of 1960. Armageddon, it seemed then, was man's fate. It may be argued today, as the revisionists argue, that this Cold War mentality was imposed on the world by ignorant men serving the interests of an imperial capitalism — the Trumans and Churchills and de Gaulles. But it was real and it was this real world, not a world that might have been or should have been or could have been, that had to be dealt with by politicians. The task fell to a generation of young men who had themselves been scarred and tested in a great war. What they collectively, and Kennedy in particular, brought to that task was a sense of leadership, a sense of rationality, a sense that somehow the tightrope could be walked and that the world would survive.

The Profits of Hope

LEADERSHIP is a quality not subject to verbal definition; it is existential and Kennedy possessed it. He embodied, as Macmillan said, "the hopes and aspirations" of mankind. He did not solve the problems of war and peace. But he created the conviction that they could be solved. He did not end the problems of racial discrimination, the problems of poverty in the world, the problems of governance. But he inspired the hope that they could be solved.

That is what is missing from the calculus of the revisionists. They applied to his life and his presidency an idealistic cost accounting procedure that measures achievement by what was done and what was left undone. It is a form of cost accounting that leaves out the psychic and emotional profits of hope. It is the kind of accounting that would find Franklin Roosevelt a failure because he left undone the perfection of man and society.

Ronald Steel, in his revisionist article, "The Kennedy Fantasy," was confronted with this existential dilemma:

"The question remains why the murder of the two Kennedys brought forth such an extraordinary outpouring of public grief. Why did so many who did not particularly admire them in life feel an irreparable sense of loss at their death? . . . Why did a revolutionary like Tom Hayden come to St. Patrick's Cathedral to mourn over the casket of Robert Kennedy? Why in the homes and shop fronts of every black ghetto do you see photos of Martin

Luther King flanked by the Kennedy brothers as a Holy Trinity of martyred saints?"

Steel's thin answer, in the case of John Kennedy, was that he possessed "a true sense of style." But it was more than "style" that inspired lines like Robert Hazel's:

*"President I love as my grandfather
loved Lincoln, in the silence after
the bugle, lie down.*

Lie in your forest of stone.

Lie close to Lincoln.

*On the dark hill a flower of light is
blooming clear as your eyes were."*

The chemistry in human perceptions is often a mystery. John Kennedy's hold on the hearts and emotions of people all over the world is a mystery only to the revisionists. That he touched them is a historical fact transcending all the verbal "facts" compiled by the new historians, proving again that words are not men.